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CHAPTER 2 – SOCIETY, CULTURE AND POLITICAL CULTURE

In order to investigate the relationship between culture and “democracy”, it will first be necessary to take a look at what could be understood by the word « culture ». Here it is assumed that culture, or such a related thing as society, is some sort of socio-anthropological object that is susceptible to scientific research. A philosophical approach that is suitable to deal with anthropological research may be provided by critical realist epistemology, introduced by Roy Bhaskar (1998a; 1998b; 1998c; cf. Holland 2005). This approach embodies the double intuition that the subjectivity of the researcher exists, but that a reality outside of such subjectivity also exists. Indeed the subjectivities of socio-cultural actors may be observed and explained in terms that are not of those subjectivities themselves (Abbink 2001: 13-14). Sensitivity to this aspect is necessary, because in studying “democracy” (but not only then) one is often confronted with the phenomenon that analytical approaches drawn from Euro-American literature are used to study non-Euro-American ethnographic material. An epistemological question that consequently arises is whether one is really producing an adequate understanding of politics in societies that are not Euro-American. To broaden culturally the conceptual base for studying “democracy”, and thus avoiding a too stark Euro-American bias in a practical way, was a major motivation for me to study political theory from non-Euro-American societies, as presented in chapter 4 below. In this chapter, however, I shall start with providing more theoretical explanation about the application of critical realism to anthropological problems and how such an application relates to problems of actors’ subjectivity and cultural ambiguity. This will provide a way to circumvent the cultural-relativistic idea that we would only be allowed to study cultures described “in their own terms”, and thus open the possibility to study cultures with concepts derived from literature that is not produced within those cultures, besides using indigenous concepts. The chapter ends with formulating ideas on political culture.

Society and critical realism

I start with the intuition that the world in which we live is not perfectly random, and so we can conclude to the existence of regularities that exist apart from individually observable events. This idea is summarized as “transcendental realism” (Bhaskar 1998a: 19-21). The really existing realm of regularities is what scientists probe by making observations. It is not, however, exhausted by “atomistic facts and their conjunctions” (1998a: 21; cf. 30). The

objects of scientific investigation “are ‘structured’ [in] that they are distinct from the patterns of events that occur” (p. 27). These structured objects are not Platonic forms, however, since they can become manifest to people in experience (p. 35).

Applying these insights to the social world, Bhaskar argues likewise that there must be a socially pre-existing reality behind the actions and thoughts that persons employ in their social interactions. Though individuals may have their private intentions for certain social behaviour, they have these very intentions because they stand in relationships towards each other (Bhaskar 1998b: 209). This means that “[e]xplanation [...] always involves irreducibly social predicates” (1998b: 209). Such social predicates form part of what Bhaskar calls “the social” or “society”, where the pre-existence of “society” is demonstrated by the recognition that people are *socialized* within society (p. 216). In general, “[s]ociety is not a mass of separable events and sequences” (p. 233). This may well be familiar when considering Durkheim’s idea of “social facts” (Bhaskar 1998b: 213), but Bhaskar then goes on that society is only “present in human action” (p. 217). The crucial argument then follows, that human action is not *determined* by society (p. 216), or, is not *reconstructible* from it (p. 217), just as society is not reducible to a mere juxtaposition of individuals: “There is an ontological hiatus between society and people” (1998b: 217). Now that society is not a mere summation of individuals, it is more properly characterized by taking relationships between people into account. Such relationships are themselves objects with autonomous existence, and consequently make themselves in principle available for being known by participants of society and also scientific investigation (pp. 206-207, 209). The fact that people can react on their society, i.e. may *transform* society (Bhaskar 1998b: 215-217) makes concepts of “change” and hence of “history” possible (p. 217). In general, people may make representations of their own society, although these representations might actually be *misrepresentations* (p. 249). It is such aspects of self-reflexivity that will be dealt with in the next section.

Culture

Many definitions of culture exist, but for the purposes of this thesis it can safely be assumed that behind the many definitions lies a template of the concept of “culture” that consists of two main components, namely in the sense that culture deals with (1) collectivities of human beings; and (2) configurations of shared (though not necessarily *universally* shared) actions, thoughts, properties, artefacts and communications associated with human beings, taking into

account human relationships (Brumann 1999).² To avoid cumbersome language below, I denote such actions, thoughts, properties, artefacts and communications with a general word, « attributes ».

The first component deals with *membership* aspects of human relations, about which more below. As for the second component, we may investigate not only the distribution of attributes across people (Brumann 1999: S6-S7), but also directly the connections between attributes as an entity largely (not entirely) abstracted from the individuals. To study such connections was a hallmark of structuralist thinking (e.g. Lévi-Strauss 1963), but less strong versions of this idea of abstracted correlation are still relevant (Brumann 1999; Boyer 1999; and the discussion below).

The relationship between culture and “democracy” is not to be seen as a straightforward derivative connection, where culture would act as it does in the cultural relativism as promoted by Herskovits (1972). Herskovits argued that the best descriptions and explanations of a culture are provided by the terms, ideas and assertions of the concerned culture itself, and not by the terms, ideas and assertions derived from other cultures (1972: 38). Viewed in this way, each culture would constitute its own anthropological theory (see also Rosaldo 1986: 83 on “settings”). This approach is problematic because it presupposes cultures (or “settings”) to be homogeneous and unequivocally bounded entities. If people disagree intra-culturally amongst each other, it is not viable to explain their respective positions with an invocation of overall interpretations of what their culture is. I shall study this aspect in more detail.

A regularly undervalued aspect of definitions of “culture” is that they allude to ideas of culture as something of a higher-order phenomenon that can *encompass* or *contain* persons or attributes as logically lower-level phenomena. The set-theoretical aspects of such definitions are not investigated to a degree as they could and should (cf. Van Dokkum 2005). Let us consider two definitions given by Brumann (1999) and Boyer (1999) to show this. Brumann proposes to represent persons and attributes in a matrix form in such a way that rows “stand for individuals” and columns “for identifiable ways of thinking, feeling, and acting” – features (1999, S6) (or attributes in the terminology used above). Then,

² The theory behind the present work assumes that the template for the understanding of the “culture” concept is itself applicable across all possibly existing cultures. “Human being” is taken as an analytical primitive that needs no further explanation, cross-culturally or otherwise (the words « person » and « individual » will be used as an equivalent of « human being »). Likewise I assume the “actions, thoughts, artefacts and communications associated with human beings” to be in no need of further analysis.

the term [« a culture »] refers to an abstract aggregate, namely, the prolonged copresence of a *set* of certain individual items” (Brumann 1999: S6; emphasis added).

Boyer stresses cognition, and his definition runs:

“ideational culture” [is] the *set* of mental representations entertained by *members* of a particular group that makes that group different from others (Boyer 1999: 206; emphasis added).

We see that both use the idea of “set” in their definitions, where Boyer makes explicit the idea of “membership”. However, no further specifications are given in the respective (1999) publications as to what the range of application of the sets is. No prohibitions are given against the inclusion of the respective sets themselves into their own range of inclusion. With Boyer’s definition this is straightforward: participants of a culture can have a mental representation of their set of mental representations, and thus the set can include itself. With Brumann some elaboration is needed.

Brumann suggests that individuals can be ascribed membership with respect to a culture according to their sharing of features in the matrix with others (1999: S6-S7), leading to the identification of (what could be called) sub-matrices. But he also interprets features directly to be able to represent statements about individuals as belonging to social collectivities, because “any observable feature can be included in [...] a matrix, including emic categories [...] and self-categorization” (1999, S6n8). This means that while viewers of the general matrix may ascribe membership of individuals concluding *from* information in the general matrix, using some analytical procedure external to it that scores correlations of features across persons, such judgements can also be included already *in* the matrix through a feature shared by people in a sub-matrix.

The problem is that there is no guarantee that the two forms of information, the scoring procedure external to the matrix on the one hand, and the information already included as features on the other, are mutually consistent. Indeed, persons holding “emic” and “self-categorizing” ideas on *what* their own culture is or what it should be, and *who* belongs to it or should (not) belong to it, may be in direct opposition with each other. Even if analytical procedures for determining membership on the basis of correlation are included in the matrix as features (there is no prohibition to do so), in an attempt to close the discrepancy between internal information and external judgements, this still does not guarantee that all

persons use an identical procedure for membership ascription.³ The same problems hold for Boyer's definition: when he writes that a set of mental representations *makes* a group different from others he refers to a judgement procedure external to the mental representations. This external procedure may, but also may not, be identical with what people can *declare* in their mental representations as identical or different groups. Again, the mental representations of people may themselves be mutually inconsistent.

The possibility for self-insertion of the definiendum into its own definiens, as demonstrated here, resembles certain phenomena encountered in the fields of set theory and logic. What is known as Curry's paradox straightforwardly enables one to prove *any arbitrary* statement from self-inclusion or self-substitution when the objective is to explain only a *specific* statement. Applied to culture, this means that it cannot be satisfactorily used to *explain* anthropological phenomena when culture is self-applicable, as in a cultural-relativistic approach where a culture is explained in its own terms. But if it is accepted that culture *is* self-applicable, it follows that culture does not determine anthropological phenomena (Van Dokkum 2004; 2005; cf. Wiredu 1974; Zhuangzi 1971: 53-54; bk. II).

A direct demonstration of this possible indeterminacy of culture is given by the following model. Suppose two persons, *M* and *N*, have different self-categorizing conceptualizations of a culture *C*, where the references «*M*», «*N*», etc. stand for persons and «*a*», «*b*», etc., and «*C*» for *C* itself by self-inclusion, for attributes within *C*:

According to *M*, $C = \{C, M, N, O, P, Q, R, a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h\}$.

According to *N*, $C = \{C, N, O, P, Q, R, S, a, c, d, e, f, g, h, i\}$.

The two conceptualizations show considerable overlap in membership of persons $\{N, O, P, Q, R\}$ and attributes $\{C, a, c, d, e, f, g, h\}$, so an attempt might be made to define a procedure external to the two conceptualizations that declares that *C* (according to *M*) can be identified with *C* (according to *N*). But then there is a problem, because *M* and *N* disagree on the membership on *M* in the group to be associated with the culture. If we follow *M*'s own analysis of *C*, *M* is a member; if we follow *N*'s analysis, *M* is not. Referring back to the idea that it might be derived from *C* itself whether *M* is a member or not begs the question because

³ This is also one reason why the classical "emic/etic" dichotomy which Brumann alludes to is less than satisfactory for anthropological research. Brumann's method (1999: S6-S7) acknowledges that demarcations between cultures may be vague, but the point here is that proposed demarcations may be flatly contradictory.

it would first have to be established whether M 's version of C is entitled to participate in the procedure to determine what C is, which would depend on an affirmative verdict of M 's membership in the group associated with C , and so on in a vicious regress. Cultures as self-including socio-anthropological objects may be thought of as things that contain themselves as well as other objects, but they do not explain exactly what objects constitute them. Cultures, in this view, may be conceived of as containers, but of a rather different sort than the packages which we encounter in the supermarket and explain to us what is inside them. The situation described here is to some extent similar to the circularity discussed above of technicalities both impacting upon and being dependent on history.

These considerations are relevant for an assessment of Benedict Anderson's (2006) idea of the nation as "imagined political community". He states that the nation is "imagined" because "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members" (2006: 6). Because Anderson uses the idea of "member", the set-theoretical considerations I have just developed apply. The difficulty then becomes to determine who "the members" of the nation are. In the quoted sentence Anderson simply assumes that "the members" are given, and that "the members" have no difficulty in recognizing each other as "fellow-members". Anderson finds an explanation for the unqualified character of nation membership in the theory that when people share certain specific items, such as "print-languages" (2006: 44) or "communications technology" (p. 135), these items would be conducive to national consciousness and solidarity (structurally, Anderson's approach largely resembles those of Brumann and Boyer). The simple model above shows that this may not be the case between M and N . Instead of taking C as "culture", we can take it as "the nation" and study "imaginings" about it. M and N would then have different "imaginings" about which people and which items⁴ they would consider relevant for their respective "imaginings" of the nation C . But from the model it is easy to see that it does not *follow* from sharing items across the different "imaginings" what the nation C is. N might consider M as *not* being a "fellow-member" of the nation C because of M 's inclusion of item b in an imagination about the nation C , which N *rejects*, even if M and N share a, c, d, e, f, g and h in their "imaginings". Indeed, people may dispute about such problems using the very "print-languages" and "communications technology" which Anderson invokes. The problem of membership is directly relevant for the analysis and praxis of "democracy" because for that it is necessary to know who "the people" are (cf. discussion by Paley 2002: 481-482),

⁴ Or *mental representations* (Boyer) of these people and items in a purely cognitive exercise. This fits better with Anderson's idea of "imagination".

especially when a nation becomes politically independent. I shall argue (in the chapters on early Frelimo history and the post-independence period) that the problem of “who is a Mozambican” cropped up during and after the independence struggle and that Frelimo had its own peculiar solutions for this indeterminacy. The complement of this problem was the question of “who is the enemy”. Anderson’s theory about “imagined communities” does not help here because it cannot accommodate disputes *about* the “imaginings”. In the approach presented here, however, the possibility (not: necessity) of such disputes emerges as a matter of course.

It appears that anthropological research operates on a somewhat more distant level, distinct from more immediately approachable “traits” or “mental representations” coupled to individuals. I identify this distinction with Bhaskar’s “ontological hiatus” (cf. above) between society and people respectively. It is here that Bateson’s insistence on the recognition of a hierarchy of levels in anthropology can be appreciated (1972; 1979; and the “Epilogue 1958” of 1958); cf. Dumont 1983: 228; Van Dokkum 2005: 131). A conclusion of Bateson was: “If social scientists would keep the levels straight, they would not use phrases like ‘society forces the individual’” (G. Bateson, in: M.C. Bateson 1994: 207). With respect to names, Bateson maintained that “[t]he name is not the thing named but is of different logical type, higher than that of the thing named” (1979: 229; cf. pp. 30-31). This would mean that anthropological descriptions and theories, where we name ethnographic objects, would be of higher logical order than those ethnographic objects (cf. Sperber 1992: 36-40). Bateson does leave open, however, the possibility that ordering in a description may “represent relations within the system to be described” (1958: 295), which would indicate that some sort of hierarchy might be discerned within the observed system. Now the following dilemma exists: hierarchical ordering would forbid that we include the science *about* a culture (as a described system) as part of that same culture, since a higher level of description cannot be subsumed under a lower one; but on the other hand it cannot be forbidden that people theorize about what they consider to be their own culture.

The solution to this dilemma which is employed here is as follows. We accept the social possibility of intra-cultural self-reflection, but for the study of specific topics, especially “democracy”, we actively *isolate* socio-anthropological phenomena in such a way that at some point an analysis *about* them will be possible, where that analysis shows the externality with respect to the isolated phenomena, as alluded to above. This isolation process includes descriptions of cultural environments that have to be compared cross-culturally. The result is collections of socio-anthropological phenomena that are expected to show some coherence,

where it is one of the tasks of the external analysis to investigate the character of that coherence.⁵ Another task will be the assessment of the possibilities for applying various interpretations of “democracy” cross-culturally. A certain hierarchy of epistemology and ontology will remain: the external analysis will be located at the highest position unattainable to the other relevant entities; the cultures to be delineated (even if approximately) are the next highest entity, while individuals and their immediately identifiable attributes form the lowest.

Political culture

“Political culture” can be conceived as “culture”, but with a special focus on problems of the relative influence of individuals on collective decision making. Political culture, like culture in general, is not by itself an explanatory theory, but rather an underdetermined entity, which gives “essential pointers towards a contextual explanation” (Abbink 2006b: 613; cf. Abbink 2006a). (Note that political communities may be underdetermined, but that does not mean they cannot differ.)

Abbink defines “political culture” as

a historically evolved style of governance, a repertoire of power symbolism, and a body of dominant values and commitments regarding the political process (Abbink 2006b: 615).

Thus within a political culture one may distinguish separate ethnographic items that have been dependent on actions in the past. Such items may be shifting and flexible rather than fixed and absolute (Ruigrok 2011: 51-54). Viewed from world history the topic is relevant whether there is any specific distinction between Western political culture(s) and political culture(s) in Africa, as in discussions referred to by Van Walraven and Thiriot (2002: 14-17, 53-55). A related issue is whether the West can be said to have encouraged or even imposed “democracy” onto African countries with results unfit for those countries (reviewed in *ibid.*: 33-43). The stance taken in this thesis is that culturally differential distribution of attributes that might be associated with any conceptualization of “democracy” can raise attention as to the significance of peculiarities of certain attributes, but that culture is not an explanatory theory for “democracy”. Analyses need to involve *operational* aspects of any conceptualization of “democracy”. These aspects are not necessarily described only in terms

⁵ “Coherence” does not have to mean “uniformity across individuals”. In my publications on Trobriand beliefs on procreation, I showed that intra-cultural inconclusiveness can be analysed systematically (Van Dokkum 1997; 2000).

of a concerned culture itself.

Summary

The present thesis will, in line with critical realist epistemology (Bhaskar 1998a, 1998b, 1998c; Abbink 2001), study cultures and societies as objects which contain regularities that may be knowable by investigation. Such investigation is not necessarily done in the terms of any studied culture itself. In fact, the very capacity of people to reflect on their own culture makes it likely that cultures themselves are not to be seen as deterministic explanatory theories of human thought and behaviour (where “not deterministic” does not imply “irrelevant”). Intra-cultural variability of thought and behaviour may exist because of self-reflection. As for the intercultural comparison of “democracy”, this necessitates the isolation, as research objects, of social phenomena out of wider cultural environments, where these environments may provide information for analysis but are not necessarily taken as deterministically explaining the research objects. Criteria for studying the isolated objects may be relativist but they are not principally cultural relativist. These ideas were specified concerning Abbink’s (2006b) conception of political culture.